

## Launches, nature can co-exist

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When the shuttle program at Kennedy Space Center ended, some 8,000 NASA and civilian workers lost their jobs. Many of those jobs were held by workers from Volusia County.

With the nation's economy as sluggish as it has been, the end of manned space flights has been extra hard on central Florida. But now, we have a new opportunity to provide good, well-paid jobs for years to come.

Space Florida is seeking 150 acres at the northern tip of Kennedy Space Center, near the Brevard-Volusia county border, for a site where private sector launches could take place. In the 1980s, Florida was the leader in commercial satellite launches, but we've lost that market to the Europeans, the Russians, the Chinese. And now the Brazilians and Indians are getting into the market, not to mention other states.

Commercial space launches are an emerging market and spaceports have been or are getting established in New Mexico, Texas, Colorado, Georgia and other states. Why? Because they see the potential for new businesses and jobs and they're courting industry leaders like Elon Musk of SpaceX, Richard Branson of Virgin Galactic, Jeff Bezos of Blue Origin and Paul Allen of Stratolaunch.

These new spaceports are in direct competition with our own Space Florida, but there is one difference.

They don't have Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University — and we do.

How many times have we complained that so many of our ERAU students graduate and go elsewhere to follow their dream of an aerospace engineering career? In February, ERAU announced plans to begin the nation's first bachelor's degree in commercial space operations, which will supply the commercial spaceflight industry with skilled graduates in the areas of space policy, spaceflight safety, and space program training, management and planning.

Bottom line, we need a facility that could employ these individuals. A site on the Brevard-Volusia border could house such a facility and put Florida back on track as the leader of commercial satellite launches. So what has to take place?

The essential next step for all parties is to begin the formal Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) process. Through the EIS, a transparent exercise with federally mandated forums where public input drives the outcome, the real facts can be made available upon which decisions may be made by informed elected officials.

There is too much at stake for this community to reject the future of the commercial space launch market, and all its potential, when the environmental impacts may indeed be limited and manageable. The dawning of the era of commercial exploitation of space is at hand, whether it's new medical or material discoveries on the International Space Station, or space-based solar power. Volusia County must be proactive in assuring its future workforce is at that table.

The continuing dialogue between NASA and Space Florida is an encouraging sign for the region's future success.

The aerospace industry has had more than 50 years of partnership in space exploration and environmental stewardship. Indeed, if not for the space program, the Cape would have long ago disappeared under a sea of condos and marinas. That legacy can and must be continued. I have no doubt Volusia County can do it best — because this opportunity is too important to our future economy.

*Cameron is senior vice president of government relations for the Daytona Regional Chamber of Commerce.*